

## Meaning in hoarding: perspectives of people who hoard on clutter, culture, and agency

Article (Accepted Version)

Orr, David M R, Preston-Shoot, Michael and Braye, Suzy (2019) Meaning in hoarding: perspectives of people who hoard on clutter, culture, and agency. *Anthropology & Medicine*, 26 (3). pp. 263-279. ISSN 1364-8470

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/71604/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Meaning in hoarding: perspectives of people who hoard on clutter, culture, and agency**

**David M.R. Orr**

**Michael Preston-Shoot**

**Suzy Braye**

Hoarding has become increasingly prominent in clinical practice and popular culture in recent years, giving rise to extensive research and commentary. Critical responses in the social sciences have criticised the cultural assumptions built in to the construct of ‘hoarding disorder’ and expressed fears that it may generate stigma outweighing its benefits; however, few of these studies have engaged directly with ‘hoarders’ themselves. This paper reports on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten individuals living in England, who received assessment and intervention for hoarding from Social Services. Their narratives drew on the cultural repertoire of values and discourses around waste and worth, the mediation of sociality and relationships through material objects, physical constraints on keeping order, and the role played by mental health. Analysing these perspectives anthropologically shows how dominant models of hoarding, such as the DSM-5 paradigm, potentially lend themselves to reductionist understandings that efface the meaning ‘hoarding’ may have and thereby deny agency to the person labelled as ‘hoarder’. More culturally informed analysis, by contrast, affords insights into the complex landscape of value, waste, social critique, emotion, interpersonal relationships and practical difficulties that may underlie hoarding cases, and points the way to more person-centred practice and analysis.

## Introduction

Hoarding disorder (HD) appeared in the psychiatric lexicon in the lead-up to the 5<sup>th</sup> Edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) (APA 2013). A person with HD experiences difficulty in getting rid of possessions regardless of their value, resulting in obstruction of living areas which prevents them being put to their intended use, and causing distress, impaired daily living or safety concerns. Whereas hoarding had previously only appeared as a symptom within Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), DSM-5 saw it fissioned off from its parent diagnosis and incorporated for the first time as HD, a new, discrete diagnosis in its own right. This clinical development is the culmination of broader processes in society's approach to the issue of hoarding. A key influence has been the development of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) models by US-based psychologists and social workers over the last two decades, which frame it through the prism of difficulties in information processing, distorted beliefs, and habituated emotional responses in regard to possessions (Wheaton 2016). Medicalisation of hoarding through inclusion in the DSM is entirely compatible with this model, and with research streams attributing it to genetic inheritance (Hirschtritt and Matthews 2014) or neuropsychological deficits (Slyne and Tolin 2014). These shifts parallel the increasingly high profile hoarding has gained in recent years, as popular television shows and books have moulded popular perceptions of individuals whose accumulation of possessions is judged to be excessive.

DSM-5 has been widely attacked for what might be labelled its own 'hoarding' tendencies. Each successive edition of the DSM has seen the accumulation of new diagnoses and the extension of existing ones (Mayes & Horwitz 2005:251), and the latest is no exception. There are concerns about psychiatric over-reach and the pathologisation of unremarkable human

experiences (Allen 2013; BPS 2011; Paris 2015). A diagnosis of HD legitimises certain interventions, such as therapy or use of mental health legislation. There may be welcome consequences, e.g. support that forestalls eviction or forced clearances (Braye et al. 2017; Slatter 2007). Less welcome, perhaps, is that diagnosis simultaneously delegitimises the perspectives individuals may hold regarding their property, through the required DSM-5 specifiers ‘good/fair,’ ‘poor’ or ‘absent’ insight. These sweeping categorisations exclude consideration of how biographical, cultural and psychological factors may render behaviours meaningful, and obscure any agency patients show in assigning their own meanings to the labels they are given. This reductionism matters for several reasons: neglecting patients’ experience may lead to their relationships with professionals becoming strained; it may help justify over-ready resort to subtle or less subtle imposition of interventions; it may remove focus from stigmatising societal reactions that contribute as much or more to distress as individual pathology; and most insidiously, it may undermine service users’ scope for exploring alternative value systems and self-definitions, cutting off reflections which might ultimately prove beneficial to them (Braye et al. 2014; Kleinman 1988; Martin 2009). DSM admittedly informs rather than dictates health and social care practice, but as a number of anthropological and psychiatric critiques have noted (Kleinman 1988; Kirmayer 2015; Luhrmann 2001), the positivism in which it is based encourages denial of the socio-cultural and experiential significance of symptoms.

This paper explores accounts from individuals identified as hoarders by human service agencies in England. Taking seriously the meanings they place on their experiences, it investigates what might be lost within a model that locates people’s relationship with their possessions purely in terms of cognitive ‘functions’ and pathology. Instead, being alert to personal and cultural factors shaping ‘hoarding’ – rather than disregarding them for an

overriding focus on the risks, deficits and symptoms taken to be bound up with it – reveals rich lifeworlds of meaning which call for a more careful, nuanced and intersubjectively informed implementation of the mental health paradigm.

### **Studying Hoarding: Clinical and Critical Perspectives**

How diagnostic boundaries are drawn is inevitably influenced not just by knowledge formations but by societal values and priorities (Jutel 2011; Kleinman 1988). Even ardent proponents of the diagnosis often acknowledge that the questions hoarding raises about consumerist norms have no easy answers and challenge the ease with which most people discard ‘worthless’ items (e.g. Frost & Steketee 2010). It should not therefore be assumed that ‘proponents’ entirely reject critical insights, any more than most ‘critics’ deny that hoarding is sometimes linked to significant suffering and distress. Generally, however, the diagnostic literature locates the ‘problem’ in the mind of the individual hoarder and, though sometimes recognising the dangers of too broad an application of diagnostic criteria, perceives the pragmatic benefits of the new diagnosis to outweigh the disadvantages (e.g. Mataix-Cols & Pertusa 2012; Nordsletten et al. 2013). By contrast, wider-angle perspectives to be found in the critical literature refocus attention on society, suspending judgements about individual pathology and asking instead why hoarding so reliably elicits framings as a mental health issue. For instance, Herring’s (2014) conceptual genealogy of the gradual emergence of hoarding as a social problem in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century US traces the role played by successive “moral panics,” which linked the disorder produced by hoarding to racial and class fears. This history highlights HD’s stigmatising potential and disproportionate effects on disempowered social groups. Others argue that hoarding’s provocation lies in how the “ambiguous matter” (Maycroft 2009) it gathers disrupts taken-for-granted patterns of consumption. In this view, value is defined relationally; without consensus on a category of ‘rubbish’ for comparison

and contrast, the assignation of worth to other items becomes threateningly destabilised (Lepselter 2011; Thompson 1979), occasioning reactions that discredit the hoarder and his/her behaviour.

The critical literature reflects on whether disorder might sometimes be productive (DeNegri-Knott & Parsons 2014; Maycroft 2009), asking whether there are sometimes alternative ways to frame the psychological deficits through which hoarding is commonly understood. Here the hoarder's ongoing failure to make decisions about keeping and discarding is validated as a functional deferral that keeps possible futures open (Lepselter 2011). Exaggeration of tiny or non-existent differences between apparently identical items, and inability to enforce a hierarchy of value on things, are revalorised as attention to subtle distinctiveness and a heightened respect for objects (Bennett 2012; Smail 2014; see also Frost & Steketee 2010:15). Mistaken anthropomorphic tendencies to invest emotionally in things rather than people (Neave et al. 2015) are revealed as an instance of actually quite widespread modes of relating, that acknowledge how people and things are mutually constituting (Kilroy-Marac 2016; Newell 2014).

The work of these writers shows how the particular relationships between self, possessions, and surroundings that characterise hoarding might be drawn differently. However, it noticeably lacks direct engagement with the perspectives of 'hoarders' themselves (Maycroft 2009), either relying on historical accounts (Herring, Smail), televisual portrayals edited as much for entertainment as for instructional value (Bennett, Eddy, Lepselter), or extrapolating from findings with non-hoarders to extend a theoretical argument to cover hoarding (Newell). It remains therefore to bring these valuable critical accounts into dialogue with studies that engage directly with 'hoarders' themselves. Proponents of HD as a disorder, meanwhile, have

done more to elicit the perspectives of hoarders: during the London Field Trial that contributed to recognition of HD in the DSM-5, 29 individuals identified as meeting criteria for HD were asked about their perceptions of the acceptability, usefulness and potential for stigma of the proposed diagnosis (Mataix-Cols et al. 2013). However, though consultation of service users during the development of a new diagnosis is certainly welcome, it is noteworthy that the sample was recruited from among those who were attending an existing hoarding support group and responders to advertisements on patient organisation websites. Those who did not themselves choose the label ‘hoarder’ may have very different views. These data therefore need complementing with a wider range of perspectives.

The participants in the present study had, through different trajectories, come into social work or social care caseloads. Most had initially been wary of services’ involvement. In interviews, they offered their accounts of why they ‘hoarded’. These accounts drew on explanations that referenced, but were far from defined by, the definitions offered by mental health discourses. Individual values and biographical trajectories informed how their perspectives echoed, contested or adapted positions drawn from the ‘cultural repertoire’ (Hannerz 1969). By this we refer to the collective arrays of discourses, explanations and symbols to which individuals may have recourse in accounting for their own or others’ experiences. Individuals draw selectively from this cultural knowledge, which has been described as akin to a ‘tool kit’ for sense-making (ibid; Swidler 1986). The narrative agency shown by participants in making use of such repertoires as are available to them offers insights into how people interpellated by the label ‘hoarders’ may situate themselves at this contemporary moment in hoarding’s evolution as a disorder.



This narrative focus is foregrounded here ahead of non-human agency. Sophisticated approaches to the theorisation of people-thing relations have been developed in recent decades, which reject the sharp ontological divide between animate and inanimate matter on philosophical and ethnographic grounds (Latour 1993). Instead they focus on routes by which to investigate the dialectical process through which people and things come to mutually constitute each other (Miller 2008; 2010), their equivalently agentive, mutual entanglements in networks (Latour 2005), or more speculatively the ‘vitality’ and ‘affect’ (Bennett 2010:61) that inheres in objects as well as people. Some of this thinking, particularly that of Miller about how things can mediate, or even constitute, relationships, informs our analysis; however, this remains an inductive narrative rather than thing-based study for both practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, at the point when we encountered participants, many of the ‘hoarded’ objects had been disposed of, making it difficult and – because of that ‘loss’ – potentially distressing to work through object-centred ethnography. Theoretically, our interest in this article is primarily in how people who hoard respond to that label, and only secondarily in what their justifications might tell us about human-thing interactions more widely. This prioritisation is a corrective to the previous inattention to hoarders’ views, rather than indicating any more fundamental theoretical statement on human-thing ontologies.

## **Methods**

The question addressed in this article is how individuals make sense of the behaviours that have led to them being labelled as ‘hoarders’ by the state agencies tasked with intervening in such situations. Individuals’ stories were sought through interviews carried out as part of a larger, multi-methods study into self-neglect in 2013-14 (Braye et al. 2014). Interviewees were provided a space for reflexive narration about how their current situation had developed, and the involvement of human services in their lives. Though many of their experiences

preceded the official creation of HD, nevertheless they were clearly classified by agencies as ‘hoarders’ at a time when the diagnosis was already being flagged and indirectly influencing practice.

The relationship between the data discussed here and the study into self-neglect of which it was a part<sup>1</sup> requires some explanation. During the larger study, the authors interviewed people in situations of self-neglect. In England, hoarding is considered to fall within the category of self-neglect, as statutory guidance issued soon after the study explicitly confirmed (DH 2014: 234, updated 2016), so unsurprisingly it featured prominently within the larger study. A sub-set of 10 individuals among those interviewed reported intervention for hoarding; it is this sub-set that provided the data explored here.

Participants were recruited through social workers, based within 10 different, geographically dispersed local authorities. They identified and made initial contact with clients who they felt might contribute to the study. Using this method to access interviewees allowed practitioners to play a gatekeeping role; this was protective of clients whose current situation or mental state made it inappropriate to interview them, but also meant that those selected were more likely to have at least a minimally cordial relationship with Social Services and perhaps to entertain the view that they ‘hoarded’ than hoarders generally. They may have been distinctive in this and in agreeing to participate in interviews; nevertheless, the views they expressed were diverse and did not simply echo professional discourses. All ten participants were aged between 50 and 80 years; five were male and five female.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews took place in different venues chosen by the clients, mostly the offices of social care organisations or interviewees’ own homes. In those homes

we were shown around, some participants described the significant reduction in things that had been achieved to make the homes navigable, usually with a degree of pride tinged with regret. In these, piles of things remained on most available surfaces; in others, objects spilled over each other with no immediately evident organising principle. One resident had made the landing outside his flat (which had previously been traversable only through tunnels in the 'hoard') into a 'sitting room' with furniture; it was only at the end of the interview that he invited the interviewer to see inside. The accumulations of things in some areas were dusty, but the homes were mostly in reasonable repair; in some cases this was the result of recent renovation work, where rotted wood and carpets or broken heating had been replaced now that they were accessible. Three interviewees indicated where accumulated cat faeces or thick grime had been cleaned. Among the topics covered in the interviews were clients' experiences of hoarding, how services had become involved, and their views on different stages of the process. Sometimes interviewees discussed specific items they had at hand, and these moments helped build rapport. Interviews were mostly recorded and transcribed; careful notes were taken instead with three interviewees who preferred not to be recorded. Each interview took place with one of the three authors. Interview duration ranged between 45 minutes and 2 ½ hours.

Data analysis followed the framework method (Gale et al. 2013), ensuring that the approach to the data was systematic, traceable and consistent across the interviews carried out by all authors. An initial index of general codes, prepared from the topic list of the semi-structured interviews and through reading and re-reading a sample of transcripts, was developed and then applied to index the content of all passages within the transcripts. All the data were then grouped by code into an analytic matrix, which enabled comparison by code of relevant data between and within interviews. Further thematic analysis was then carried out, focusing this

time not just on the topic relevance of what interviewees had said, but on newly identified themes emerging from the interview data themselves, rather than from the initial framework. The analysis in this paper focuses on the themes that emerged from the codes relating to the nature of hoarding. This approach yielded four major themes that characterised the discourses drawn on by the study participants: notions of value and waste; connections with sociality, relationships and/or loss; physical constraints; and the role of mental health. Often these themes overlapped within a single person's account.

### **Making Sense of Hoarding**

Most hoarders' accounts were consistent in that they found ways of making sense of the phenomenon. The reasons varied, but there was usually an explanation lying behind the hoarding; it was *not* seen as the predetermined result simply of cognitive, affective, genetic or neurochemical deficits, but as intelligible to varying extents once the context was known. Beyond that, however, situations and narratives could be very different; as Sophie, one of the interviewees, put it, 'All hoarders are individuals with individual reasons.' She herself seemed to have assumed – not without ambivalence – an identity within which hoarding was an integral part, declaring that 'Hoarding is my mind.' On learning about our research, she had invited the interviewer to her home, saying that 'My mind is my house,' and felt it was important to see how she lived if we were to understand why she hoarded. Sitting amidst piles of clothes, shoes, books, supermarket goods, and jumble sale acquisitions, some of which spilled out of the conservatory into the garden, she talked about how, while her parents were alive, she 'used to keep drawers and cupboards tidy' under their influence, but that doing so had created 'a false impression.' 'This,' she added, 'is me as I really am.'

Sophie was unusual among our interviewees in the extent to which she had explicitly configured her perception of her ‘real self’ around her hoarding, but many foregrounded in their accounts different ways in which the ‘hoarding’ habit held significant personal meaning for them. Often such meaning co-existed alongside practical constraints that they reported made it difficult to impose more normative standards of order within their homes.

### *Notions of value and waste*

Participants commonly foregrounded the significant personal value invested in the possessions they had accumulated. Where they did not embrace the term ‘hoarding’ as Sophie appeared to – and many did not – it was this discourse that they employed to dispute the terminology that others casually used and the assumptions behind it. Individuals sometimes related the worth that they saw in the materials they owned to hobbies or to the use-value that items might have. Hence Bruce, who had accumulated vast amounts of scrap metal, timber, old furniture and other materials in his upper-floor apartment, was at pains to distinguish between parts of his hoard:

Anyway the doctor said, “You had 15 tons of rubbish?!” I said, “It was not all rubbish,” because I did object to that word.

Sometimes interviewees differentiated between hoarding and collecting. When he first met with the support worker who would help him clear his apartment, Don had said:

“But I’m not a hoarder,” and [he] agreed with me that I’m not a ‘hoarder hoarder’; I’m a ‘gross collector’-type thing, because it’s not rubbish, is it? It’s a clutter of things that are reusable.

Gareth, meanwhile, explicitly rejected the labels of either ‘hoarder’ or ‘collector,’ on the grounds that the possessions filling several rooms of the two houses belonging to him and his

wife were valuable to him because of ‘the information contained within them,’ rather than their ‘physicality.’

Although the ‘hoarding/collecting’ binary has become commonplace, its boundaries become fuzzy when looking at the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the ‘hoarder’ him/herself. It rests on the assumption that it is possible to distinguish objectively between items that have value – ‘not rubbish,’ as Don puts it – and those that do not, but this rarely remains uncontested. Bruce reflected on how his accumulating tendencies had arisen:

Now how it came to be like that, I think my background – and I’m not blaming my background – when I was a little boy, the [Second World] War had just started. Everything had a value, every bit of wood, nails from packing cases. We would straighten them and collect everything, because everything in my eyes then, and indeed now, has potential use.

The initial disclaimer conveys that he considers his individual choices and agency to have had an important role and is not suggesting that the cultural forces of the 1940s fully determined his later behaviour,<sup>2</sup> yet nonetheless this historical reference drew attention to the fluctuations during his lifetime in how ‘waste’ was defined and the value ascribed to it. At another moment in the interview, he asserted that,

My whole psyche – and my father’s – was if it’s useful, save it. There was a slogan we had in the war, they put out posters, ‘Make do and mend.’ You did not throw clothes away, that is part of my psyche. [...] Everyone did it, the whole of British society was deeply encouraged by Mr. Churchill to do it.

Validation by the collective war effort and by the iconic figure of Winston Churchill (both highly-regarded in the UK today) offers Bruce a powerful symbolism with which to subvert contemporary judgements centring on hoarding.

Commentaries such as these indicate how individuals actively strove to contest the identities that others ascribed to them because of the extent of their possessions. When they undercut the descriptor ‘hoarding’ by claiming that the ‘hoard’ was mostly ‘good stuff’ or endorsed alternative labels (‘accumulating’, ‘collecting’), they were employing subtle distinctions not easily accommodated within the DSM diagnosis of HD.

Moreover, the centrality of assessments of value and waste to the accounts we gathered stands in stark contrast to prevailing perceptions of hoarding. In DSM-5, the diagnostic criteria refer to hoarders’ difficulty in parting with items ‘*regardless* of their actual value’ (APA, 2013:247, our emphasis), and hoarders are frequently viewed as indiscriminating between worth and worthlessness in objects (Lepselter 2011). Smail writes in relation to hoarders ‘how difficult it can be for some people to create and enforce the hierarchy of use and uselessness’ (2014:122). However, for our informants items were never entirely equivalent in value; they invariably applied hierarchies of what was and was not worth keeping, even if those hierarchies are seen by society as deeply idiosyncratic. Equally, hoarders are popularly thought to be unwilling to countenance relinquishing any of what they have accumulated, but exchange-value in fact featured heavily in the narratives put forward in the interviews. For example, Bruce had gathered much of his hoard partly for his hobby of carpentry, but he was fully aware that he had far more than he would be able to use himself in a lifetime. He was able to give a history of the rise and fall in the price of scrap copper (worth £6000 [US\$8000-9500] a ton at one point, he claimed, before falling to half that) and said that he had been waiting for it to rise again before taking it to the dealer. He used an approximate calculation of how much his ‘three truckloads’ of timber would have cost from a store to support his argument that what he had accumulated was far from worthless junk.

Meanwhile, Don, who like Bruce emphasized the value of much of what he had collected, spoke of how he would

love to have a hoarders' market where the hoarders get together, get some tables and the stuff they've got, sell. [...] If people think it's muck but it sells, try and sell it to get something back from what you've done, your investment in a way.

Though few had thought through the resale and potential return on their belongings like these two, others also raised the possibility of selling on at least some of their things, but claimed no suitable opportunities had arisen to date. More exceptionally, one of the social workers interviewed described a case characterised by a similar preoccupation with getting value from belongings, though manifested very differently. The young man concerned, Douglas, would

hold onto things like his pizza wrappers and his carrier bags that he's bought things from and I think it's around him wanting to ... He's bought those, they're his, "so I'm keeping hold of them," because I don't think he's really ever had much in his life.

Rather than resale and potential return, for Douglas what mattered was the extraction of maximum value from his purchases while still in ownership of them. That he attributed such value not just to the content, but to the wrappings and containers, is at odds with societal norms, but cannot be said to be indiscriminating. Douglas perceived value where most others would not, but – at least according to his social worker – for him this seems to have been closely intertwined with the status or positive affect conferred by 'owning,' of having 'paid for,' the items. Though there was no opportunity to interview Douglas directly, and we should therefore be cautious in drawing inferences from this account, this reading of his situation strikingly reinforces the contested significance of value in hoarding.

Often it was not the gain resulting from selling that appealed, but the sense that the possessions would not be going to waste. Hence Bruce, although he had accepted the



necessity for the removal of his hoard, was saddened that the potential value was never realized, and emphatically declared that he would have preferred to give it away rather than see it wasted. Just as frequently, hoarders suggested that they might donate their possessions to charity shops, but also expressed doubts. Angus, for example, seemed initially to be showing the classic indecision that has been linked to hoarding, but went on to explain quite cogent reasons behind his uncertainty:

[... I ...] don't exactly want it but don't want to throw it away neither. [...]I don't know, I'm in two minds as to whether to donate things to charity. A lot of what you give to charity ends up in the bin, gets chucked away, I know it does. Even good things, brand new things sometimes. I gave my sister a while ago a handbag – Avon handbag, still in the packet. Brand spanking new, got it out of a charity shop bin. Chucked away. Nothing wrong with it, just nobody had been in to buy it. [...]It's mind-boggling, what charities throw away, I tell you. Crazy.

Angus went on:

I know what I know, and I know things will end up probably in landfill. Just get chucked away and they're not going to be used for what they ought to be used for. They won't be put to good use, they won't be, that's it. Nobody wants them. We live in a throwaway society all the time, even animals: pets, dogs, cats. People buy cats and dogs for Christmas for people, after a few days or weeks or couple of months, "I'm fed up with him now." Turf him out, he's on the streets. [...]That's what I mean, we live in a throwaway society. It's a nightmare.

The notion of a 'throwaway society' came up often for critique. Angus and the others felt that they, as owners of things, had a responsibility for them that did not end when they had finished getting direct use from them. Even where neither selling nor keeping items was seen as desirable, respondents wanted to give them to someone who would value them. In

expressing such wishes, our interviewees were envisaging an ‘imagined community’ with more effective distribution of objects through society. The excess of ‘waste’ just described would be reduced by recovering it into the category of useful material, in such a way as to increase societal well-being. Far from the self-absorption that television portrayals often suggest is at the heart of the issue (Lepselter 2011), ‘hoarding’ is here constructed by the people thus labelled as the by-product of active social concerns.

### *Connections with Sociality, Relationships and/or Loss*

In keeping with such concerns for wider society, participants also presented concern with their own interpersonal relationships and the happiness of those around them as a key reason for keeping things. Dominant perceptions of hoarding portray it isolating the hoarder behind barricades of material objects, which form both a symbolic and a literal barrier to contact with other people (Herring 2014). Interviewees sometimes acknowledged this, to a degree: Diana spoke of feeling too ashamed to let people into her house, while both Sarah and Gareth referred to the tensions their accumulation caused with their spouses. Bruce, meanwhile, seemed to take pride in not being dictated to by social norms, making – in his words – ‘few concessions to society’s views’ as ‘I don’t give a toss!’ Yet others saw it differently; in their accounts, their possessions acted to reinforce rather than sever social ties. Hence Sophie linked her hoarding to a desire for things that had belonged to people, as she felt this would create a connection between them. This made her reluctant to throw out things that other people had given to her. As she ‘need[ed] to be needed,’ in her words, such connections were very important to her and led her to do a lot of voluntary work. One of the reasons for her acquisitions was that they meant people would know she might have something they were short of. For Sophie, therefore, things not only ‘stood in’ for people, but acted as ‘go-betweens,’ leading her to accumulate in the hope of anticipating the future needs of others.

The reverse process could also occur, as in the case of Janet, who became ‘a bit of a dumping ground for other people.’ Knowing that she would be happy to receive things, they were reported to have got into the habit of offering old objects to her rather than disposing of them in other ways. Like these two, other hoarders we spoke to were active in their local communities and by no means ostracised or living as hermits. Though there were exceptions – Bruce in particular spoke of his collection as something of a refuge to which he could retreat and said that he did not need a lot of people around him – the majority were clear that the trajectories of their property, whether coming into, remaining within, or (more seldom) leaving their possession, mediated relationships with the goal of increasing not only their own, but also others’ happiness.

Not all relationships in life are positive. Don, for example, linked his collecting habit to his father’s treatment of him as a child. The story he told was of paternal cruelty: whenever relatives or friends would give him toys, his father would destroy them, perhaps out of a puritan distaste for play or sheer nastiness. He was once given a set of model planes by his aunt:

My dad was the greenest-eyed demon in the world and I was playing with these planes [...] My dad came in and he straightaway looked at them and said, “What are these?” Mexican hat dance, he stomped on all of them. Destroyed them.

This had happened so often that Don got into the habit of digging holes in the garden and burying his toys in plastic bags, so that he could play with them when his father was not around. As he put it, ‘you can understand where the earlier days of what happened to me of collecting [came from]’; like Douglas, his approach to his possessions as an adult was shaped by early deprivation. It was perhaps in Don’s telling of what collecting now meant to him that the value of gifts and friendship came through most strongly; he volunteered detailed

accounts of individual gifts he had both given and received, and the reasons why that particular item was especially valuable to that particular person.

For some interviewees, experience of loss was linked in with the theme of relationships. In these cases, accumulated possessions might index particularly close relationships which had been interrupted by death. However, loss need not only be conceptualised in terms of relationships with people. Don framed the experiences he recounted of deprivation of his toys at the hands of his father as loss of things:

I think it was just, as I say, because everything was took away from me at an early stage. [...] I had too much took away from me.

Now he pointed out that he had given away possessions many times, but indicated how unhelpful pressure to declutter might be:

If I give stuff away it's my choice – but not to have something taken away from me, do you know what I mean?

### *Physical constraints*

Participants not only engaged with the causes of their accumulation in terms of values, relationships, emotion and symbolism, but also in relation to practical difficulties that impeded them from keeping greater order in their homes. Health conditions, lack of time, and space constraints contributed to the circumstances that led to hoarding. Sophie's physical health impeded her from bending down to pick things up; Sarah lacked energy to clear up. Gareth, like others, traced the build-up of things in his home back partly to failures to prioritise putting them in order at the time:

Life was ever full for me, I always had things to do. It just got left.

Two people, both living in local authority flats, attributed some blame to lack of space: ‘It’s a very confined space’ (Angus); ‘[The flats]’re pigeon-holes, to tell you the truth’ (Don).

Lack of time, energy and space for household possessions is a commonplace modern-day experience, hardly restricted to hoarders (Arnold and Lang 2007:47; Löfgren 2016).

According to our interviewees, these factors exacerbated the states of accumulation in which they lived, though none argued that they eclipsed the other considerations described here.

Practical issues were thus experienced as relevant but not as solely determinant.

### *Mental health*

Mental health featured in the accounts of many interviewees, though not in uniform ways.

Martin had taken steps to seek help from the local authority for hoarding only after seeing it presented as a mental disorder on television:

I’d seen on the television about the hoarders, you know. I said to the lady who was coming at the time, [...] ‘I’ve heard it’s a mental health issue,’ and she said, ‘Well, it is, yes.’

Conceptualising his situation as mental health-related had provided the impetus to act. Lucy recounted how previously she had ‘just kept thinking “oh, it’s me.”’ Learning that hoarding could be a mental illness had then felt liberating, explaining ‘why it always seems to keep happening, building up again and again.’ Attending a support group had further helped to reassure her that she was

not a complete out-of-space weirdo and that it is a lot more common than people realise.

In providing a way of making sense of the lack of agency she experienced in the face of the 'hoard', this helped her to accept herself and made available a form of collective identity that might otherwise have been inaccessible.

Bruce and Gareth, on the other hand, seemed more ambivalent about the 'mental health' label. Bruce recounted the relief of encountering a degree of acceptance and normalisation when he was found out:

In some ways I felt relieved that I wasn't the only - alright - 'sick' person, because I did feel sick mentally. I thought 'I'm not the only one.' I thought I was the only one on the planet, I really did.

He later asked for mental state assessments; when the psychologist had delivered the verdict that 'Bruce is very rational,' Bruce had responded, 'Anyone who lives like this must be nuts!' But in Bruce's account, the final professional verdict was that,

Apparently I'm hyper-rational, I don't know whether that's a good or bad thing – or not.

Gareth too noted that 'I do pride myself on my rationality.' In the face of his wife's regular comments that he 'should go into a mental institution,' however, he did occasionally question his choices:

There's a very severe pressure there – you worry about it and you think, 'Am I being rational in what I'm choosing to do?'

For Bruce, this tension between mental illness and rationality reflects a pervasive oscillation within his narrative between – on the one hand – the significant distress that he recognised hoarding caused for him and the extent to which it had got out of hand, and – on the other – the reasonable explanations he felt he could give for his collecting; Gareth, meanwhile, defensively marshalled rationality claims against what he experienced as attacks on his way

of living. Both proactively sought to contest imputations of irrationality, implied by HD and its popular portrayals, Bruce buttressing this claim by organising his narrative to culminate in an ‘expert’ view that to some extent vindicates his justifications. He leaves unanswered whether this is ultimately a good or bad thing; not everything that makes sense is necessarily helpful, although this seems to be the assumption underlying DSM-5’s invocation of rationality in its focus on ‘*actual* value’.

Martin and Lucy had both previously experienced a period of diagnosed depression, possibly making them more comfortable with questions of mental health. For them, mental health frameworks pointed to a situation shared with other people who acted in similar ways, normalising their behaviour; or, failing that, attenuating the degree to which they could be held responsible for it (Littlewood 2002). For Bruce and Gareth, this was contested territory in which they resisted the perceived discrediting of their psychologies through claims to alternative rationality – a route foregone by Martin and Lucy. Either way, interviewees adopted or disputed mental health framings according to the uses they offered. Claims about the stigmatising power of HD (Herring 2014) find some resonance, yet also evident is how some individuals found that the category mitigated self-stigma by highlighting a common experience.

## **Discussion**

Everyone interviewed had found ways of making sense of hoarding in terms of their life-stories, social relationships, and personal values. Personal biographies and social contexts informed how individuals’ accounts not only dialogued with mental health perspectives, but also selectively tapped into the cultural repertoire of established, everyday discourses that would resonate with many: getting a fair price for what one sells; rejection of the ‘throwaway

society'; green-minded recognition of the importance of recycling; waste not, want not; keeping something in memory of a loved one; the difficulty of finding space at home for everything. Their narratives challenge the incomprehension, or indifference, with which the DSM treats hoarders' 'persistent difficulty discarding' and 'perceived need to save the items' (APA 2013:247). Some spoke back – at times tentatively or ambivalently, at times with conviction – to the professional and societal judgements made about hoarding; Bruce highlighted the historical contingency of the value attributed to things, while many suggested that the dismissal of their 'hoard' stemmed from lack of appreciation or knowledge of its worth, whether monetary, use-centred, or affect-laden. Contesting professional judgments in this way allowed individual hoarders to position themselves as discerning selves, an important counter-narrative that disputes the competency of the comparatively uninformed practitioners to evaluate their decisions about keeping and discarding.

Hoarding is commonly linked to mental distress. However, the relative contributions to this distress of (a)the phenomenology of the hoarding itself, (b)other experiences of loss or trauma and (c)the societal reactions that hoarding provokes, are often unclear. In other words, assuming that the hoarding *behaviour* itself is the key issue to be addressed may oversimplify, as our interviewees' accounts illustrated. Yet this is elided by the DSM category of HD, in which 'clinically significant distress' is equally significant as a diagnostic criterion whether caused by hoarding itself or by others' attempts to prevent it – a catch-22 that makes it impossible to take hoarding on the person's own terms (Eddy 2014) or to see anything other than the 'hoard' as the problem.

Interviewees' presentation of identity with regard to thing-relations not only diverged at times from this clinical perspective, but is also difficult to reconcile fully with portrayals as



“people[...] preternaturally attuned to the call from things” (Bennett 2012:241). Though powerful in its revalorisation of an outlook more typically pitied and derided, and doubtless insightful in some cases, this common trope potentially further exoticises hoarding. By ‘othering’ hoarders as the bearers of “special sensory access” to things’ properties (ibid:244), it marginalises these participants’ strategic and culturally intelligible use of the repertoire available to them in justifying their choices. Most central for them was an acute awareness of the networks of people and of exchange in which each item was, and might potentially be, embedded. The ‘hoard’ of objects was not generally seen as a barrier to or replacement for human relationships (*contra* Neave 2015), but as a nexus encapsulating forms of worth that often had social value at their centre.

It is significant also what the interview data did *not* say. Remarkably few messages were articulated that deal with ridding as *simply discarding things*, as opposed to disposing of them in select, socially lauded ways. Exhortations to recycle or to re-use, or to let charity shops and on-line auction sites sell unneeded items, had strong echoes here. Meanwhile, merely ‘throwing things away’ rarely seemed to be considered as an option. Explicitly, contemporary society disapproves of this habitual, still ubiquitous, act. There is a marked contrast with an earlier period of modernity, the age of ‘disposability’, characterised by conspicuous pride taken in the ability to discard the by-products and obsolescent objects of consumption freely, knowing that that they would be efficiently removed from sight and mind (Lucas 2002). Ease of disposal has now become ethically more contested, even embarrassing. Yet extensive infrastructures continue to be maintained, as dedicated as ever to the convenient removal of households’ daily waste from their immediate concerns – the implicit counterpoint to overt social condemnation. To the despair of environmental campaigners, much of society prefers not to enquire too closely into this contradiction. This, coupled with the remarkable

efficiency that accounts for how discarding rubbish has become an automatic, unthinking act in daily life, means – as waste researchers have pointed out (Hawkins 2006; Thill 2015:19-21) – that disposal has become for the most part a culturally unexamined action. One might speculate that the absence of discussion of disposal as something that society defines, in some circumstances, as straightforward and acceptable complicates the situation for some of the ‘hoarders’ who, as the interviews have indicated, often find themselves highly conflicted over, and with a pronounced sense of responsibility for, disposal of things they own. Behaviours understood as mental disorders, as hoarding has been, commonly index the unresolved contradictions of cultural stress-points in this way (Littlewood 2002:17-18). Our informants mostly reported that what they found most helpful when they had accepted getting rid of some of their possessions were support workers who ‘rolled up their sleeves’ alongside them, and provided practical, down-to-earth advice and action on how to sort and discard; perhaps they found it a way to avoid over-thinking the question of what were and were not ethical forms of disposal.<sup>3</sup>

In considering the significance of the perspectives expressed in these interviews, due regard must be given to other considerations, notably the materiality of hoarding and its consequences. To highlight the justifications presented for hoarding is not to ignore the material risks it presents: fire hazard, risk of accidents, deterioration of the home, and sometimes hygiene concerns. These risks affect others as well as the ‘hoarder’, may therefore sometimes justify imposed intervention, and should be acknowledged. More problematically, clinicians may argue that many of the views expressed lack insight and should therefore be treated as no more than an epiphenomenon of mental disorder. We concede that qualitative interviews of this kind should not unreflexively be accorded privileged truth-status as they represent a particular, necessarily partial construction in a specific context (Miczo 2003);

anthropology of course favours ethnography because it offers the possibility of observing what people do as well as what they say, but it would be extremely challenging to observe the slow accumulation of ‘hoards’ of this type. Nevertheless, the data presented here have much to say about why these possessions matter to individuals with HD, with important implications for practitioners and researchers working with hoarding. ‘Finding the person’ (Braye et al. 2014) behind the ‘hoard’ means according due respect to their motivations and agency, exploring the ‘meaning of the mess’ (Preston-Shoot and Rockliffe 1984), and understanding it within its sociocultural context. In speaking about their reasons for filling their homes with things, these individuals alluded to a complex landscape of value, waste, social critique, emotion, interpersonal relationships and practical difficulties that can all too easily be lost sight of behind ‘HD’ or a focus on psychological deficits. Where this occurs, it hinders clear perceptions of the phenomenology of hoarding.

The possibility of diagnosis with HD is far from entirely negative. It opens the possibility of therapeutic solutions, where evictions or forced clearances might otherwise be the only avenues, and the interviews showed that some people find naming their situation in this way reassuring or constructive. Equally, the CBT model has its uses, though its effectiveness is frequently limited (Wheaton 2016). The danger is that the availability of the label leads to reductionist understandings that submerge the person’s ethical sensibilities or sources of comfort beneath a model that conceives hoarding only in terms of deficits. Interventions based on such an understanding may be ineffective and obstruct engagement between practitioners and service users, whereas more responsive, negotiated approaches often hold more promise (Braye et al. 2014). The more meaning-centred focus outlined here therefore offers an important corrective.

This paper started by discussing how DSM-5 and the application of CBT techniques have contributed to shifts in perspective on hoarding. These changes bring hoarding partially out of the ambit of housing and environmental health, and under the ‘clinical gaze’ (Foucault 1963/2003). In this context, as the words of the participants reported here attest, an important task for researchers is to ensure that that gaze does not entirely overlook agency, culture and meaning when addressing the challenges that hoarding presents.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was funded by the Department of Health for England. Ethical approval was received from the national Social Care Research Ethics Committee (Ref. 13/IEC08/0013). Our sincere thanks go to everyone who assisted with this research, in particular those who agreed to be interviewed.

### **References**

- Allen, F. 2013. *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt against out-of-control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Everyday Life*. New York: HarperCollins.
- American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Washington, DC: APA.
- Arnold, J.E. and Lang, P.A. 2007. “Changing American home life: trends in domestic leisure and storage among middle-class families.” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 28:23-48.
- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Bennett, J. 2012. "Powers of the hoard: further notes on material agency." In *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, edited by J.J. Cohen, 237-269. Washington: Punctum.
- Braye, S., Orr, D. and Preston-Shoot, M. 2014. *Self-neglect policy and practice: building an evidence-base for adult social care*. London: SCIE.
- Braye, S., Orr, D. and Preston-Shoot, M. 2017. "Self-neglect and hoarding." In *Safeguarding Adults under the Care Act 2014: understanding good practice*, edited by A. Cooper and E. White. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- British Psychological Society. 2011. *Response to the American Psychiatric Association: DSM-5 Development*. Leicester: BPS. Available at: <http://apps.bps.org.uk/publicationfiles/consultation-responses/DSM-5%202011%20-%20BPS%20response.pdf> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2016)
- DeNegri-Knott, J. & Parsons, E. 2014. "Disordering things." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 13:89-97.
- Department of Health. 2014. *Care and Support Statutory Guidance, Issued under the Care Act 2014*. London: DH. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/366104/43380\\_23902777\\_Care\\_Act\\_Book.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/366104/43380_23902777_Care_Act_Book.pdf) (accessed 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2015)
- Eddy, C. 2014. "The art of consumption: capitalist excess and individual psychosis in *Hoarders*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 44(1):1-24.
- Foucault, M. 1963/2003. *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge.
- Frost, R.O. & Steketee, G. 2010. *Stuff: Compulsive hoarding and the meaning of things*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

- Gale, N.K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S. and Redwood, S. 2013. "Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research." *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 13: article 117.
- Hannerz, U. 1969. *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hawkins, G. 2006. *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Herring, S. 2014. *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hirschtritt, M. and Mathews, C. 2014. "Genetics and Family Models of Hoarding Disorder." In *Oxford Handbook of Hoarding and Acquiring*, edited by R.O. Frost and G. Steketee, 159-176. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jutel, A. 2011. *Putting a name to it: diagnosis in contemporary society*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kilroy-Marac, K. 2016. "A magical reorientation of the modern: Professional Organizers and thingly care in contemporary North America." *Cultural Anthropology* 31(3):438-457.
- Kirmayer, L. 2015. "Empathy and Alterity in Psychiatry." In *Re-Visioning Psychiatry*, edited by L. Kirmayer, R. Lemelson & C.A. Cummings, 141-167. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kleinman, A. 1988. *Rethinking Psychiatry: From Cultural Category to Personal Experience*. New York: Free Press.
- Latour, B. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. 2005. *An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lepselter, S. 2011. "The disorder of things: hoarding narratives in popular media." *Anthropological Quarterly* 84(4):919-947.

- Littlewood, R. 2002. *Pathologies of the West: An Anthropology of Mental Illness in Europe and America*. London: Continuum.
- Löfgren, O. 2016. "Mess: on domestic overflows." *Consumption, Markets & Culture* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2016.1158767>
- Lucas, G. 2002. "Disposability and dispossession in the twentieth century." *Journal of Material Culture* 7(1):5-22.
- Luhmann, T. 2001. *Of Two Minds: An Anthropologists Looks at American Psychiatry*. New York: Vintage.
- Martin, E. 2009. *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mataix-Cols, D. & Pertusa, A. 2012. "Hoarding disorder: potential benefits and pitfalls of a new mental disorder." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 53(5):608-618.
- Mataix-Cols, D., Billotti, L., Fernández de la Cruz, L. and Nordsletten, A.E. 2013. "The London field trial for hoarding disorder." *Psychological Medicine* 43(4):837-847.
- Maycroft, N. 2009. "Not moving things along: hoarding, clutter and other ambiguous matter." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8: 354-364.
- Mayes, R. and Horwitz, A. 2005. "DSM-III and the revolution in the classification of mental illness." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 41(3):249-267.
- Miczo, N. 2003. "Beyond the 'fetishism of words': considerations on the use of the interview to gather chronic illness narratives." *Qualitative Health Research* 13(4):469-490.
- Miller, D. 2008. *The Comfort of Things*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Miller, D. 2010. *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Neave, N., Jackson, R., Saxton, T. & Hönekopp, J. 2015. "The influence of anthropomorphic tendencies on human hoarding behaviours." *Personality and Individual Differences* 71:214-219.

- Newell, S. 2014. "The matter of the unfetish: hoarding and the spirit of possessions." *Hau* 4(3):185-213.
- Nordsletten, A.E., Fernández de la Cruz, L., Billotti, D. & Mataix-Cols, D. 2013. "Finders keepers: the features differentiating hoarding disorder from normal collecting." *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 54:229-237.
- Paris, J. 2015. *Overdiagnosis in Psychiatry: how modern psychiatry lost its way while creating a diagnosis for almost all of life's misfortunes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Preston-Shoot, M. and Rockliffe, S. 1984. "The meaning of the mess: a case study." *FSU Quarterly* 32:26-36.
- Slatter, M. 2007. "Treasures, trash and tenure: hoarding and housing risk." *People, Place & Policy* 2(1):28-36.
- Slyne, K. and Tolin, D. 2014. "The Neurobiology of Hoarding Disorder." In *Oxford Handbook of Hoarding and Acquiring*, edited by R.O. Frost and G. Steketee, 177-186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smail, D. 2014. "Neurohistory in action: hoarding and the human past." *Isis* 105(1):110-122.
- Swidler, A. 1986. "Culture in action: symbols and strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51:273-286.
- Thill, B. 2015. *Waste*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Thompson, M. 1979. *Rubbish Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wheaton M. 2016. "Understanding and treating hoarding disorder: a review of cognitive-behavioral models and treatment." *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 9:43-50.

---

<sup>1</sup> For details of the study and more information on the methods followed, see Braye et al. (2014).

<sup>2</sup> In partially disowning the influence of this period, Bruce may also be distancing his self-presentation from common British stereotypes of older adults as inveterate hoarders. Janet's son referenced this:



---

What I did see I put down to being born in 1925 and growing up through the War. It's a sort of stereotypical 'well, people of that age never threw anything away,' so you kind of accepted it.

<sup>3</sup> Kilroy-Marac (2016:449-450) describes an interesting variant approach, where Personal Organisers (de-clutterers) work with the grain of the hoarder's empathy and ethical responsibility for things by pushing them to ask if the thing might be 'happier' elsewhere. In the contexts described, this seems an admirable example of engaging meaningfully with the person's lifeworld.